

IN THE COURSE OF AN HOUR OR TWO

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IDIOT AND THE BORN MANAGER," ETC.

A BROWN-EYED Alabama girl had come to the manufacturing town in which Hampstead lived, and had wrought as sudden havoc as a boiler-explosion. She alternately teased and dazzled Hampstead until she flitted back to the South in April. He found that he missed her abominably; he began to write, to send candy, flowers, books—for which he received in turn notes consisting principally of adjectives.

In June she wrote that she had gone to her family's summer home in Canada, a village on Lake Erie especially patronized by Alabama people. Then six weeks slipped by without a word. His letters were unanswered, his violets unacknowledged.

Adèle had never said she cared for him—but the way she had looked up at him! There was something inexplicable in her present conduct, and Hampstead finally determined to clear up the mystery.

The hotel-clerk readily directed him to Miss Evans's home, where the servant told him he would find her in the orchard at the left.

Is there a prettier setting for a pretty girl than a Canadian orchard in August? The trees were laden with apples—red, yellow, or pink-flushed as a peach, with pyramids of fruit piled up here and there on the thick, sweet-scented grass; and between two low-branched trees was a capacious hammock in which Adèle swayed lightly.

She wore white, with coquettish bows on hair and dress, placed just where a touch of color was most alluring. Her red lips were parted in a smile, and her big brown eyes loomed up, exactly as

Hampstead had remembered, but at another man! And though no one was near but the birds, as far as the two absorbed people knew, their voices were pitched to a low murmur.

When Adèle saw her caller, she sprang to her feet and greeted him with cordial friendliness. She told him how pleasant it was that some good breeze had blown him hither; and then, with a becoming blush, she introduced her fiancé.

He was a Canadian, and from the desultory conversation which followed Hampstead gathered that she had met him only that summer. The intruder felt miserably *de trop*. In the struggle to find a topic, he admired the little lake at the foot of the terrace.

"It's quite delightful on the water; we must certainly take you out rowing while you're here."

Adèle's tone was perfunctory, while the Canadian's boredom had reached the silent stage.

"Thanks, but I shall be leaving in the morning. If you will lend me your boat a while, it would be pleasant to row about a bit," said Hampstead, snatching at any hope of escape. "One feels so stuffy after the train!"

Permission was given with suspicious warmth. As Hampstead went down the terrace, he heard the quickened interest in their voices as they took up the thread of the interrupted conversation.

"As I was saying—"

Again the soft mumbling commenced. Only two can mumble.

Silver Lake was a bijou stretch of water, but Hampstead was blind to its charm as with angry, uneven strokes he sent the boat skimming over its surface.

He took out a box of cigarettes, and a piece of paper dropped from his pocket. He glanced at it with an expletive unusual to his speech. It was a receipted bill from the florist.

"I'm done with them," he kept saying to himself; "especially with brown-eyed ones. To think of that little flirt being engaged to a man whom she had never seen six weeks ago! That shows how superficial she is. And a Canadian at that! Nothing on earth is more foolish than for Americans to fall in love with people of other nationalities. Poor girl! A quick love-affair, and with a Canadian! I feel it in my heart to be sorry for her."

II

HE noticed that he had almost reached a tiny island mid-lake. He decided to get off and explore the place, as he couldn't paddle around forever on that idiotic tub of a lake. Three trees had managed to find a foothold upon the island, besides some hawthorn-bushes and flowering shrubs. Under its most imposing tree was a cleared grassy place. From this spot a girl arose in quick dismay.

"Has anything happened?" At Hampstead's puzzled look she explained: "I thought you must have come to bring me a message from my brother. You came in his boat."

"Did I? I didn't know it. I was calling on Miss Evans, who very kindly lent it to me."

The girl smiled in spite of herself. She evidently knew something of Adèle's resources in securing uninterrupted *tête-à-têtes*.

"Did they say anything about coming over to the island? They were to join me here for tea, and I've been waiting ten minutes."

"They did not mention it. Perhaps my calling inopportunistly made them forget."

The stranger must have had an unusually good disposition, for instead of showing annoyance, she merely looked indulgent.

"Miss Evans has told me of her engagement," pursued Hampstead. Somehow, the fact was less poignant now that he had spoken the words aloud and casually. "I think that matter was engross-

ing their attention exclusively. Shall I row back and remind them of you?"

"Oh, no!" She considered a moment, and then said, with frank hospitality: "Could you possibly be hungry? For if you could, I should be glad for one of Adèle's friends to stay and share her supper."

"Could I? I am starving! There was no dining-car, and I reached the hotel here after luncheon."

"You have had nothing since breakfast, then?" she cried in shocked kindness.

There is a type of woman to whom nothing appeals so strongly as an opportunity to minister to the creature comforts of those about her. The tired caller finds herself in an easy chair with a cup of tea; the neighborhood children learn where there is a perennial supply of cookies; happy are the sick whom they serve; and, though they are laughed at sometimes as "men-spoilers," they are not found among the ranks of the discontented or the divorced.

Letitia spread a snowy cloth on the grass, and began to arrange the tempting contents of the picnic-basket. Corn on the ear, and hot as if from an oven, was taken from its air-tight compartment; creamy butter, lettuce sandwiches, broiled chicken, deviled eggs, a crisp bread unknown to him, orange marmalade, and the most delectable spiced cakes were spread in inviting array. Never had Hampstead known how delightful an *al fresco* meal may be. He had not realized how hungry he was, and he was so pleasantly encouraged to eat!

The shadows grew longer, the quiet peace of the afternoon unconsciously soothed his spirit, and his companion was such a jolly girl! Her white frock suited her slender, boyish figure; she wore no hat, and the wind rumbled her wavy brown hair.

"She isn't exactly pretty," thought Hampstead, "except that she has such white teeth and such a splendid, healthy color, and her eyes meet yours as straight as a man's!" They were brown, by the way, but he had overlooked it. "Now, before I knew Adèle an hour, we were deep in personalities, discussing the secret of charm, or platonic friendship, or love, or something that had to do with

the relation between men and women. But this girl!"

He had lighted a cigarette with her permission, and it gave him an opportunity of listening in silence as she talked of books, of music, or of the village life about them, which she sketched with humorous sympathy. The girl was unconscious of the fact that she was finding herself more at ease with this man than with any she had ever met. She did not recognize that it was the dawn of her awakening as she took a womanly satisfaction in seeing how the tired, hurt lines about his mouth had smoothed back into contentment.

Across the sky a heron, flying near the water, passed them in long, lazy flight, and rested on a dead limb at the water's edge. The serried ranks of the larches outlined the western edge of the lake, marshaled like soldiers for battle. The sun had sunk behind them, but the after-glow stained the sky with rose and gold and malachite. Hampstead watched how luminous the girl's face grew, as if all her being responded to the fleeting glory of the day.

She rose, her reluctant eyes fixed on the sky-line.

"I must go. Mother will be expecting me, and we are keeping the heron from his sleeping quarters. He always roosts on that pine."

"Won't you let me row you over?"

"No, thank you, it's less than five minutes to our landing. That's our house directly across, with the big oaks, and the lawn to the water's edge. There's mother waving for me! Do you see Letitia running down the slope, with the collie behind her? She is my littlest niece, and my namesake. I'll introduce you to her to-morrow."

Each saw the pleasure that lit the other's face as she spoke of the next afternoon, when Hampstead had asked permission to call.

III

HAMPSTEAD pushed the boat off, and watched her "feathering" with practised strokes until she reached the landing. In the lingering light he could see the little group make its way to the house, the collie capering about them, the child clinging to Letitia's hand, the mother with a

dependent arm about the strong young shoulders.

The island seemed as deserted as Crusoe's now that it lacked that sweet, wholesome presence.

"What a woman!" he exclaimed. "Not a note of self or of vanity in her whole make-up! I did not know there was a girl in the world as free from affectation or consciousness. Letitia!"

His half-forgotten Latin came back to him, and he recalled that the word meant "joy."

Her fiancé had gone, but he found Adèle waiting upon the porch. Amusement at his long absence had given place to anxiety, which in turn had deepened into alarm. Men had been driven to suicide from disappointments of this kind. How blind she had been to trust him upon the lake! But when Hampstead at last appeared, with an apology for keeping the boat so long, her relief was overpowered by her amazement at the cheerfulness of his air.

"This is good-by, isn't it?" she asked. "You said you would be leaving in the morning."

"Did I? It is so cool and pleasant here, I've decided to stay on for a fortnight."

This was puzzling, bewildering. Was Hampstead vain enough to imagine that he could supplant Arthur? Adèle stiffened a little.

"Oh-h! You must come up to-morrow afternoon, then, and Arthur and I will take you out on the lake."

"Thanks awfully, it's very good of you both, but I've an engagement. Good night!"

He shook hands cordially and walked off. There was not a trace of bravado in his manner; it was sheer happiness and expectancy. Adèle listened to his elastic step, to the light-hearted tune he was whistling.

"To think that he was in love with me this very afternoon!" she gasped.

Even then she did not know the extent of a man's possible mental tergiversation in the course of an hour or two, for she did not know that Hampstead had deprecated Americans marrying Canadians, that he had sneered at quick love-affairs, and that he had vowed to eschew girls—especially brown-eyed ones!